In February 2011 over 1000 gay and bisexual men took part in Get it Wet!, New Zealand’s first community study of actual HIV infection. The aim was to measure what proportion have HIV, and how many are unaware of their infection.

Researchers from the University of Otago and the New Zealand AIDS Foundation did this by inviting men to provide a saliva specimen at the same time as filling out a questionnaire. Individuals couldn’t be identified as participation was anonymous. The findings tell us important things about HIV in our communities.

Who took part?

1049 men who have sex with men (MSM) participated at the Big Gay Out, gay saunas, cruise clubs and gay bars in Auckland. It included men of different ethnicities and sexual identities, and a third were aged under 30. Most lived in Auckland, but some were visiting from elsewhere in New Zealand and others from overseas.

How many are living with HIV?

Overall 6.5% of respondents (or about 1 in 15 men) had HIV based on their saliva specimens.

The prevalence of HIV infection was higher among men aged 30-44 (7.5%) or 45 and over (8.9%), and also among men who lived overseas (13.7%).

HIV prevalence also varied by certain behaviours over the previous 6 months. It was highest among those:

- who had between 6-20 sexual partners (9.9%) or more than 20 partners (12.9%)
- who had engaged in anal sex without a condom with a casual partner (11.9%)
- who had engaged in sex with a man met on an Internet dating site (9.4%)
- who had injected drugs (20%)

Men unaware of their HIV infection

About 1 in 5 men (20.9%) found to have HIV were unaware of their infection. They were from all age groups and ethnicities, and reported a variety of behaviours that would place others at risk of HIV infection. Some were in a regular relationship and some were having a lot of new sexual partners.

Three-quarters of the respondents who were unaware they now had HIV had in fact tested negative for HIV sometime in the past. Most still believed they were currently uninfected.

What does this tell us?

Gay and bisexual men are the group most affected by HIV in New Zealand. The study shows that about 1 in 15 are HIV positive, and this is higher in some groups of men than others. Encouragingly, this level of infection is quite low by international standards, and it’s important to acknowledge this success.

Not everyone with HIV knows they’re infected. Around 1 in 5 gay and bisexual men with HIV were undiagnosed. A person with undiagnosed HIV cannot tell someone they’re infected and might not initiate safe sex.

Even if that person has tested negative in the past, and tells you they’re negative, they might have acquired HIV since that test and be placing others at risk without knowing it.

This is why condom use remains the best way to take control of your own and your partner’s risk—it’s a sure way to stop HIV transmission.

If you’re concerned about HIV it’s easy to get a test. New treatments for HIV help control infection but this can only happen if you’re diagnosed.

This was the first study of its kind in New Zealand, and the research team wishes to thank everyone who took part in 2011. For a copy of the project in different ways.

For more findings see: www.otago.ac.nz/aidesepigrp

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